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Making Your Web Site Work for You

It's hard to imagine "Life Before web sites", isn't it? They got huge in the late 1990s and today every business has one – or should, including yours. If you don't have one, get one. And do it now. This is top of mind because we recently redesigned our web site (www.wtblase.com) and are in the process of changing and refreshing copy on it. Frankly, the site was showing its age. In the early days, like a lot of firms, we simply put up brochureware, as it's become known. And it worked. It was effective in terms of being a virtual storefront that brought in traffic. But why wear *Keds* when you can wear *Nike Air Zooms*?

Web site design today has become sophisticated. The good news is that it's not all that difficult or expensive to implement. Here's my advice on how to get started.

Step 1: Define Your Site – Your firm will not only be defined by the content you post, but by the sophistication of your web site, so it's critical to give this some thought. What are your strengths and services? What message do you want to convey? What perception do you want visitors to walk away with? Not surprisingly, the visual piece is huge here. But you don't want to create a site where the visual trumps your message. I don't want people clicking on to my web site because cool things are happening there. I want them to visit because of who we are and what we do. Also think in terms of global positioning. It is, after all, the World Wide Web.

Step 2: Pick An Address – My recommendation here is to keep it simple. Select a domain name that's short and easy to type. Trust me, I know. We went from www.wtblaseandassociatesinc.com to www.wtblase.com. It's much easier to remember, not to mention easier to type. You can register a web address for as little as \$10 a year and I suggest using ".com" as your domain suffix because it's still the most popular. I also bought "wtblase.net" as well, just to protect my brand. Any number of sites sell domain names, including GoDaddy, Register, NetworkSolutions and Yahoo.

Step 3: Design Your Site – In most cases, a web site has just seconds to make an impact. Seriously. It's that fleeting. There are a couple of ways to go here. There are on-line web hosting services that offer pre-designed web templates that you can customize to meet your own needs. Most of them also have a help desk. Or consider checking out Guru.com or TopDesignFirms.com, which has a state-by-state listing of web designers and developers. Design is also where things can get expensive—very expensive. One way to cut your costs is to purchase images from a microstock agency like Shutterstock, Fotolia or DreamsTime. These up-and-comers have great stuff that's a bargain when you compare them to the iconic Getty Images

or Corbis. [Tip: As you select your images, make sure they are consistent with the rest of your marketing materials. And, like your marketing materials, your web site must be vetted for compliance].

Step 4: Find A Web Host – We put our site in the hands of our designer but there are plenty of on-line options as well–Weebly, Microsoft, SynthaSite, and GoDaddy, among them. Some will host your site’s content for free. The key is making sure the company has a good track record and that it delivers what it says it can. Do your due diligence. Talk to people you know who have web sites. Go with someone tried and true.

Step 5: Bring On The Traffic – If you aren’t familiar with the acronym SEO, you should be. Just google “W. T. Blase” and you’ll find that my firm’s web site holds the No. 1 ranking, along with the next nine spots. This is an example of search engine optimization, or SEO. Google “Bill Blase” and our web site is listed second. That’s the sweet spot you want to be in: easy to find. How do you do that? Start by submitting your domain name to the major search engines like Google, MSN and Yahoo. Also, use language on your web site that can help people find you. If you are a New York City emerging money manager, say it. Also, check the top search results to see what the competition is doing. Then take it to the next level. Take their experience and their idea, and do them one better. Also keep your content fresh and appealing: Write a weekly market outlook or client investment letter. Headline a coming special event. Blog if you’re good at it. Give visitors a reason to come back.

Step 6: Take Ownership – The biggest criticism of web sites, not just in this industry but across sectors, is that they become outdated so quickly. There’s nothing worse than going to a news releases tab, for example, and finding that the most recent “news” dates back to 2007. Put someone in charge, whether it’s you or a webmaster you designate. Keep the content current and, above all, be sure to respond promptly to e-mail inquiries. This is supposed to help enhance customer service and the client relationship—not diminish it. The launch of a web site isn’t the end. It’s just the beginning.

Up next: How to create an online press room

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